

Gould Discourse:
Becoming a Religion For Our Time

(by Deane M. Perkins, April 29, 2011)

There is a wonderful story about a youth named Lou who lived in northern New York along the Hudson with which I would like to begin.

“Through Lou’s youth, the family had owned only one vehicle—a red 1942 farm truck...that rattled and coughed....It was no small thing, then, when the Herberts purchased a new car. Lou was sixteen at the time, and he was eager to show the car to his friends in town. The day after his father brought it home, Lou asked if he could take it for some errands. Sensing his son’s excitement, Lou’s father readily agreed.”

“Lou ran out to the driveway and started it up. The low hum of the engine exhilarated him and he stroked the

dash in anticipation. Just then he remembered he had left his wallet in the house and ran in to get it. When he raced back out, to his horror, the car had vanished! Lou remembered his feeling of panic, and then the awful thought that the car might have rolled down the slope of the approach and spilled off the driveway and into the Hudson [River].”

“*Didn't I put it back in park?* Lou had screamed in his mind as he ran down the drive. *Didn't I set the brake?*”

“Where the lane turned, sure enough, fresh tire tracks headed down the hill toward the river. Lou sprinted to the edge of the bluff and looked some twenty feet down.

There, looking back at him, were the headlights of his father's car. He stood frozen as the water slowly sucked the car under the surface and out of sight.”

“Lou walked numbly up to the house, wondering how he could break the news to his father....For a moment, Lou considered quietly exiting, and his mind raced with thoughts of running away.”

“‘Forget something else?’ his father asked. ‘No,’ Lou responded. There was no avoiding it now...there was nowhere to hide.”

“‘Dad,’ he said, his voice breaking. ‘I— He couldn’t go on. ‘I—‘ He gasped for air and the courage to tell what happened.”

“‘Dad, I—the car—‘he stammered as his chest heaved between words. ‘I think I must have forgotten to set the brake,’ he blurted. ‘It’s in the river, Dad. The car is in the river! I’m so sorry,’ he said, bursting into sobs. ‘I’m so sorry!’”

“Lou was trembling while waiting for his father to respond. His father didn’t turn to him but still sat holding the newspaper wide before him. He then slowly reached his left hand to the top corner of the right-hand page and turned it to continue reading. And then he said it, the sentence Lou would never forget. He said, ‘Well, I guess you’ll have to take the truck then.’”

“Lou realized in this moment that his father’s heart was at peace toward Lou, a peace so powerful that it couldn’t be interrupted even by a provocation so great as the sudden loss of a hard-earned car. Perhaps in his wisdom he knew Lou was now the last person who would ever put another car into the river. Perhaps in that instant he divined that a lecture would serve no purpose, and to start one would only hurt an already hurting son.” *(The Anatomy of*

Peace, The Arbinger Institute, pgs. 58-60)

There is a depth of care and compassion that is so moving in this story that it compels me to ask: is this not the love that we yearn for for ourselves, and wish to give to others? Is this not the transformative power of love that connects us intimately to our spiritual self? Is this not the kind of heart that we truly want to experience through our faith communities as well?

So when our Association President, Rev. Peter Morales, tells us that our call as Unitarian Universalists is to be a “Religion For Our Time,” I want to be clear about two things. It seems to me that a “religion for our time” must first foster an atmosphere—which I will unabashedly call a theological foundation or theological context—where, because our heart is at peace, we do not “hurt an already hurting child.” And second, a religion for our time must foster care and compassion as natural manifestations

of spiritual depth. In all candor, I think our movement has come a long way, but that we are still *becoming* a religion for our time. We need, I believe, a theological base and spiritual deepening.

Two years ago Peter Morales gave his own Baltimore sermon where he talked eloquently about eight specific areas necessary for a faith community to be “a religion for our time.”

“First,” he says, “I do not believe that a religion for our time can ask people to reject the religious traditions they grew up with. We can, however, create a religion that draws wisdom and strength from our religious pasts even while we transcend them.”

Second, “A religion for our time must see science and human learning as a partner, not an enemy. We must move beyond treating myths and poetry as if they were history or

science.”

Third, “just as a religion for our time respects humanity’s diverse traditions, so too must it respect human diversity. It must begin with the premise that each one of us matters.”

Fourth, “A religion for our time must be about wholeness, integrity, and engagement. It must promote the spiritual practices that give us depth and insight: meditation, prayer, small groups, and music. It must touch our hearts as well as our heads.”

Fifth, “Our new religion must promote deep reflection, but it must never, never, become an escape from life or descend into navel gazing narcissism.”

Sixth, “A religion for our time must be prophetic.... It must raise a powerful voice against violence, injustice,

racism, economic exploitation, and the destruction of life on our planet.”

Seventh, “A religion for our time must strive to transform the world.”

And eighth, “our new religion must have a vision of a multiracial and multicultural future. It must invite people to come together in love to help create a new world—a world of peace, justice, equity, compassion and stewardship of the environment.” (see Peter Morales’ Baltimore sermon, May, 2009)

I concur with these eight elements, and would like to reflect further on two aspects. The first is when Peter notes that, “We can create a religion that draws wisdom and strength from our religious pasts....” While the reference is primarily to our own past growing up in another church, synagogue, mosque or temple, I would like us to journey back to the first millennium of the common era. And I

would like to introduce our journey back by referring to one of the great early Christian churches that stand to this day, the Church of Holy Wisdom, the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, Turkey. Although built in the sixth century and converted into a mosque in the fifteenth century, much of the construction and original artwork remain. Its beauty is reflected in a poem that comes from the ancient text known as the *Wisdom of Solomon*:

Wisdom is radiant and unfading,
and she is easily discerned by those who love her,
She pervades and penetrates all things,
a breath of the power of God,
an image of God's goodness,
She renews all things;
In every generation she passes into holy souls
and makes them friends of God and prophets,
She is more beautiful than the sun.

I first visited the Hagia Sophia close to forty years ago. And when entering, a visitor cannot help but

experience a sense of awe and wonder. The floor of the nave alone is an acre of ivory marble. In the towering apse is a beautiful mosaic of Mary with her child on her lap, and the angels Gabriel and Michael are on either side. The dome of Hagia Sophia is 180 feet high and has forty windows at its base, allowing the ethereal sunlight to pour through. The marble columns, with carvings of leaves and vines appear to be a grove of trees. To enter this Church of Holy Wisdom, is to enter paradise.

This was the experience available to anyone who entered the church in ancient times, an experience that reminded people that in a world full of pain, tragedy, and death, there were spaces of peace and equanimity where, in the present, life and truth and beauty could be appreciated and loved. This was a space where people felt surrounded by Sophia, by Wisdom, by the presence of the sacred and

the divine. In the midst of a world fraught with injustice and sorrow, paradise remained intact—it existed in the here and now. (see *Saving Paradise*, by Parker and Brock, pgs. 203-206)

This is the conclusion that Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker came to in their very fine work, *Saving Paradise*. They traveled throughout the Mediterranean region, visiting churches from Rome to Istanbul, researching for five years the imagery, artwork, liturgy and history of early Christianity. And they discovered something quite astounding—there were no images of Jesus dying in agony on the cross. In other words, the death of Jesus for Christians in the first thousand years “was not a key to meaning, not an image of devotion, not a ritual symbol of faith” for worshipping Christians. (Ibid.,

xi)

I have been a student of religious studies all my adult life, and never has something like this even occurred to me. I was brought up, as I suspect many of you were as well, in a traditional Christian church, where the image of Jesus on the cross—often in agony—was always in your face. Moreover, “We learned in Sunday School and church that... the crucifixion of Jesus Christ saved the world and that this idea was the core of Christian faith.” (Ibid., xi) But what if this were not the case? What if Christianity had been quite different? After reading *Saving Paradise*, I had to see for myself. And so a year ago I, too, was in the Mediterranean region, looking at early churches, including, once again, the Hagia Sophia, and other sacred sites in a different way. And to my amazement, there were, in fact, no images of Jesus on the cross.

“To our surprise and delight,” remark Brock and Parker, “we discovered that the early Christian paradise was something other than ‘heaven’ or the afterlife. Our modern views of heaven and paradise think of them as a world after death. However, in the early church, paradise—first and foremost—was this world, permeated and blessed by the Spirit of God. **It was on the earth.** Images of it in Rome and Ravenna captured the craggy, scruffy pastoral landscape, the orchards, the clear night skies, and teeming waters of the Mediterranean world, as if they were lit by a power from within. Sparkling mosaics in vivid colors captured the world’s luminosity. The images filled the walls of spaces in which liturgies fostered aesthetic, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual experiences of life in the present, in a world created as good and delightful.” (Ibid., xv)

And so early “Christians filled their sanctuaries with images of Jesus as a living presence in a vibrant world. He appears as a shepherd, a teacher, a healer; he is an infant, a youth, and a bearded elder. But he is never dead. When he appears with the cross, he stands in front of it, serene, resurrected. The world around him is ablaze with beauty. These are images of paradise—paradise **in this world.**” (Ibid., jacket cover)

I would like to suggest that this notion of paradise potentially has profound implications for us today as Unitarian Universalists. We actually preserve the understanding of such a “theology of paradise” in every one of our congregations and in our Association as a whole. We actually preserve that understanding of paradise that was prevalent in the first one thousand years of Christian history, and which has its roots in Judaism. And so I would

suggest that instead of our tendency as Unitarian Universalists to forsake or deny our Christian background and pasts, that we fully embrace them and own them. Instead of floundering for an identity, for roots that give us a solid foundation, maybe it is time to adopt a non-systematic, non-doctrinal, non-creedal theology firmly based in our past; that is, a theology of paradise.

This contrasts dramatically to orthodox or traditional Christian theology which is crucifixion-centered. Once Christianity became crucifixion-centered—that is, based solidly in a theological doctrine of atonement where it is believed that Jesus died for our sins--then it is ripe for all sorts of mythologies espousing a myriad of doctrines, creeds, and belief systems.

But not so with paradise. The early churches established sacred space—paradise—within their own sanctuaries in order to maintain ground separate from the rule and space of any outside authority. Indeed, early Christians were life-affirming, and, as such, the church had to stay grounded in love, in justice, in wisdom, in nonviolence, and in freedom. People had to live together in harmony as much as humanly possible, and to care for each other.

And so they did. In this country's current political biases, the early church would be accused of socialism and communism. For the church communities helped everyone to share resources, to care for each other in sickness and in need, to cultivate justice, and to create non-punitive systems of restitution, rehabilitation, and restoration in the

acknowledgment that human beings sometimes fail to live up to their own values. Living in paradise now, together, meant ultimately that love was to flourish in their communities. This was the purpose of the early church--to celebrate paradise and the divine in the here and now, and within ourselves, others, and our world. (Ibid., see xviii-xix)

While we may not use the word paradise to express what it is we do, we too, as Unitarian Universalists, foster an understanding of the sacred in the present, in others, in ourselves, in our world and its ecosystems. We, too, foster justice and nonviolence, and question those systems and authorities that diminish life, love, care, and beauty. We, too, hold to an affirmation of life—and celebrate its gifts—that is simultaneously individual and communal; that is, we

are a church that struggles—like all living entities—to greater equity, wholeness, compassion, and grace.

All of this flows naturally from an understanding of paradise as this-worldly. Granted, it presupposes that the ground of being—whether we consider it to be love, energy, God, Atman-Brahman, justice, life itself-- is ultimately beneficent, as does all the theologies and philosophies we seem to like as Unitarian Universalists, including humanism, transcendentalism, and process theology.

Nevertheless, we do not deny the reality of evil, of tragedy, of pain. It is precisely because of the horrors that surround us, of the tragedies that occur to us, to our neighbors, and to our fellow citizens throughout the world that we need sacred space in our lives that provides a context for hope and meaning. We need to know, that in

spite of all the pain, we are still holy people. This is what the early church did; it is what we do as Unitarian Universalists.

We have never lost sight of paradise; we have never lost sight of beauty and truth in this life; we have never lost sight of the struggle and search for more just ways to meet all peoples' needs; we have never lost sight of our task as caregivers and stewards of the environment.

This historical journey to early Christianity seems to me to be important to us as Unitarian Universalists—it is important for us to be aware of the dominant paradigm during the first millennium of Christian worship . For **we** preserve a sacred tradition—and it is **our** tradition inherited from our Judaeo-Christian background that we can name, own, and honor. It is something substantive and profound

that perhaps our own movement does not recognize fully, for our theology is life-affirming, not crucifixion-centered. It is grounded in paradise, in a substantive understanding of the sacred, in justice that meets all peoples' needs, in nonviolence as a way of life, in caring for others and distributing goods equitably to all, in gazing at the world in wonder, honoring our environment, and feeling blessed.

The irony is that Unitarian Universalism, though considered heretical by orthodox Christianity, was and is actually preserving the Jewish and Christian traditions of paradise. And for the majority of us who **left** a traditional synagogue or church, this is good news. Whether we were able to name it or not, we left because our need to affirm life in its fullness was not being met; we became Unitarian

Univeralists because of the hope to live the reality of paradise.

Paradise, as a theological foundation for early Christianity, **and**, as a theological foundation for Unitarian Universalism, gives us roots, gives us a sense of identity, gives us an explicit way of being in the world. And while it does not deny the reality of evil, it is life-affirming. Our worship services, even our memorial services are all celebrations of life--life here and now.

But paradise, as a theological context and foundation, is also quite demanding of us. Anything that is life-denying is ethically and theologically dubious. Anything that adds hurt to an already hurting child is questionable. Paradise demands that we promote **all** aspects of life. And this brings us to spiritual deepening. Peter Morales said that,

“A religion for our time must be about wholeness, integrity, and engagement. It must promote the spiritual practices that give us depth and insight.” I am not convinced that paradise, or life-affirmation, is possible without spiritual deepening. I concur with Carl Jung that the individuation process is a part of our very being, that our journey through life is a journey towards wholeness. We are called, in the very depth of our being, to be healed and to be whole. We are called to be the spiritual beings that we are already.

Michael Servetus, one of our heroes from the sixteenth century who wrote, *On The Errors of the Trinity*, and died at the hands of the Inquisition, stated, “God himself is our spirit indwelling in us. In this we testify that there is in our spirit a certain working **latent energy**, a certain **heavenly sense**, a **latent divinity** and it bloweth

where it listeth and I hear its voice...” (*Out of the Flames*, by Lawrence and Nancy Goldstone, pg.).

To put it another way, and it is one of our own stories found in *The Church Where People Laugh*, “The fundamentalist Christian said to a Unitarian Universalist, ‘I hear you deny the divinity of Christ.’ To which the UU responded, ‘No, that’s not true. We don’t deny the divinity of anybody.’” (*The Church Where People Laugh*, ed. by Foss, pg. 37)

And one of my favorite Universalist stories, one that I suspect many of you have heard, is about Hosea Ballou, who was a famous Universalist preacher in the 1800s: “He was arguing the question of eternal damnation with a Methodist man of the cloth. Ballou quoted a number of Bible verses that showed the love of God for all, but the Methodist minister was unconvinced. ‘Brother Ballou,’ he remonstrated, ‘if I were a Universalist, and feared not the

fires of hell, I could hit you over the head, steal your horse and saddle and ride away, and I'd still go to heaven!' 'If you were a Universalist,' Ballou replied, 'the idea would never occur to you.'” (Ibid., pg. 27)

The fact that “the idea would never occur to” Ballou or to Universalists says something, it seems to me, about ethical and spiritual depth. I could see the Buddha saying exactly the same thing. That we are spiritual or divine beings, I admit, is a faith statement. That we yearn for spiritual deepening seems, however, to be an existential need.

Last year, for a few months, I was fortunate enough to be part of the District's Vision or Futures Team. You may recall that members of the team visited or called every congregation in our District to talk about the future of the

District and the relationship between the congregations and District. One of the most pervasive and consistent themes that came from those interviews was the desire for support in relation to congregational and individual spiritual deepening.

Our own Rev. Jennifer Crow, at Rochester Unitarian, in her article, *Our Question-Mark Faith*, writes that “If we look deeper to the sense of fragmentation that many Americans are experiencing in this fast paced, consumer-driven culture, perhaps it is not so surprising that Americans are searching for and embracing faith communities that help them to make sense of their world and to live more authentic lives....the questions that bring people to church are: How can I lead a deeper spiritual life? How can I be engaged with something beyond day-to-day

secular life? How can I be part of a community of meaning and purpose?”

Jen further notes “that the real vocation of our congregations is to turn tourists into pilgrims.” And so “we must invite the tourists to come in out of the hallways, offering a pilgrimage of substance and depth that can help heal the fragmentation of our modern world, creating through our churches the beloved community of love and justice we so long for in this world...the individual longs to go on a journey that combines a deeper understanding of tradition”—and I’ll add paradise as an option—“with an emphasis on integrating personal spiritual experience.” (*Our*

Question-Mark Faith by Jennifer Crow, from *Rev. X*, pgs. 62-63)

I appreciate Jen’s thoughts here, particularly since it also reflects exactly what you were telling the District Futures Team.

We have a very simple hymn in *Singing the Journey*, the supplement to our hymnal, called, *Return Again*. Here are the words: “Return again, return again, return to the home of your soul. Return to who you are, return to what you are, return to where you are, born and reborn again.”

However we understand the word, “soul,” it is our Self, as Hinduism understands the divine Self; it is our very Being, our Being as Love itself; it is our Spirit, our Spirit as Holy and Sacred—these are what we return to. And if we want an example of the innocence, vulnerability and depth that this entails, all we have to do is look at our children. “For each child that’s born, a morning star rises and sings to the universe who we are.” (Ysaye Barnwell, hymn 1051)

Parker Palmer, in his work, *A Hidden Wholeness*, speaks of the “winged energy of delight.” “This energy,”

he says, comes from the soul—the core of pure being that children are so intimate with—that is, as the poet Rumi says, ‘here for its own joy.’ The remarkable resilience youngsters often reveal, even in the face of great hardship, comes from this place called the soul. And the soul animates the ‘secret lives’ that many of us led as children, in an effort to shield our vulnerable selfhood from the threats of the world.” (Parker Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness*, pg. 14) Lou’s father, instead of hurting an already hurting child, understood his son’s soul—and his own.

It has always been interesting to me that the predominant paradigm in the West regarding human nature is that human beings consist of both animal and human. That which we call spiritual is something we have to learn about, acquire, study, and work diligently at. But the

Eastern Orthodox understanding of human nature is quite different. Human beings are both animal and spiritual—what needs to be worked on is our humanness, our human understanding of what it means to be, by nature, animal and spiritual already.

Our worldview changes dramatically when we already see ourselves as spiritual beings. For then our pilgrimage in life truly is a matter of returning to who and what it is we truly are. Rather than being redeemed by something external because we are never good enough—this is the theology of the atonement or crucifixion-centered Christology—we are instead called to return to our hearts, to our soul. We are to be born and reborn over and over again. Our life is a calling to that which we are already—a spiritual being.

This is nothing new. Buddhism talks about the Buddha-nature within each of us. Hinduism claims that the Atman, the Self with a capital “S” which is without ego, is one with the Brahman, the divine within the universe; that is, the divine within and the divine surrounding us are one and the same. And some of the Gnostic Gospels, particularly the Gospel of Thomas, suggests we are Jesus’ twin; we are, like Jesus, divine.

Our feeling lost sometimes, our feeling disconnected, our feeling alone, are the wanderings of the soul trying to return again to itself. This is our pilgrimage; this is our calling. But it does not serve us well to deny our pain and our vulnerability. We need to feel the hurt, the pain, the sadness—within ourselves, among our neighbors, within the world. It is what gives us a deeper laugh. It is what

compels us to do something constructive in the world and among ourselves. It is what allows us to love deeply and openly. It is what gives the divine child within, the room to love the divine child in all. All of this follows and flows from a paradisiacal theology, from a foundational theology where life, love, beauty, and compassion are the norm.

So it seems to me that our UUA President is correct in emphasizing the eight points whereby he concludes that we are A Religion For Our Time. But I am not convinced that we have gone far enough. In fact, I think we have to take an enormous leap of faith, something we Unitarian Universalists are perhaps reluctant to do. The wonderful irony, the extraordinary paradox is that for us truly to be A Religion For Our Time in the 21st century, we non-creedal, non-doctrinal people will need a theology we can call our own. I would like to suggest a Theology of Paradise.

Moreover, we need to return again to who we are--to our spiritual self. I have the suspicion that these two needs—the need for a theological foundation like paradise and the need for spiritual deepening--are really one and the same.

Leo Buscaglia, the love guru of the 1980s, tells of a contest he was asked to judge; the contest was to find the most caring child. The winner was a four-year-old child whose next door neighbor was an elderly gentleman who had recently lost his wife. Upon seeing the man cry, the little boy went into the old gentleman's yard, climbed onto his lap, and just sat there. When his Mother asked him what he had said to the neighbor, the little boy said, "Nothing, I just helped him cry." (e-mail from A. Shaw, Jan. 20, 2004)

Such innocence. Such beauty. Such caring and love. Such spiritual depth. Ah, Paradise! It is what is needed for an already hurting child—regardless of age. It is what is

needed to return again. And then, then we shall be A
Religion For Our Time!

So be it!